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ABSTRACT

The monograph on the counseling of Mexican-American parents of mentally retarded children begins with a discussion of Mexican-American culture, on the premise that a good knowledge of background, culture, customs, and mores is necessary to understand and counsel such parents. Treated are stereotyped images of each other held by Anglos and Mexican-Americans, economic and social interrelationships and fears, values and structure of the family, and concept of health and sickness. The counseling session with the parents is discussed in terms of creating an atmosphere conducive to open communication, explaining the concept and causes of mental retardation in simple terms, and exploring with parents the roles which they and the school will play in relation to their retarded child. (KW)

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THE DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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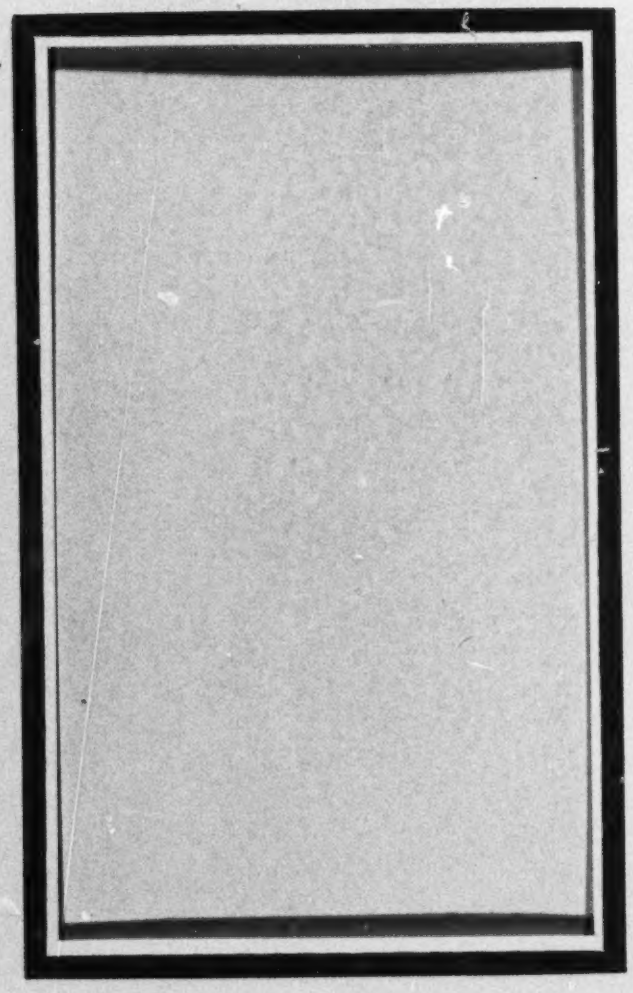

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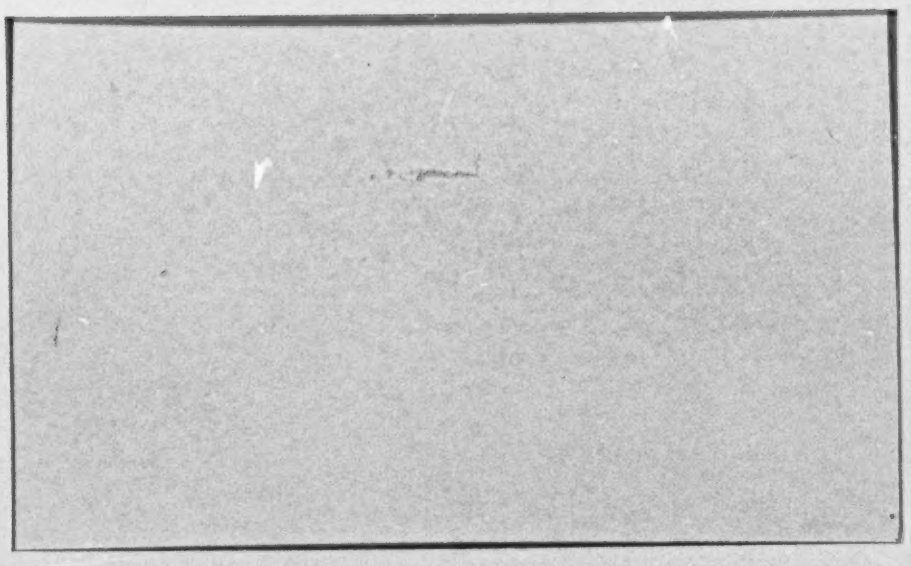

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AN APPROACH FOR COUNSELING MEXICAN-AMERICAN PARENTS OF MENTALLY RETARDED CHILDREN

by

Homero Acevedo

Vol. I No. 4

Social Science - Humanities Research Associate V
The University of Texas at Austin

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PURPOSE

In the field of Special Education, guidance and counseling of and for the parent has definitely been lacking. A fair share has been written recently of guidance for the educated parents of the average child, but not so for the parents of the exceptional child and "... even less has been directed to the parents with limited background of formal education or little or no knowledge of the nature of handicapping and what it entails."(1) Literature on guidance and counseling minority groups is beginning to make its appearance; however, the parents of the Mexican-American exceptional child have been completely neglected. In reviewing the existing literature, we find that nothing is on hand concerning this ethnic group -- the largest of the minority groups in Texas.

It is for this parent and those who work with this ethnic group that this monograph is intended. The ideas herein experienced are from experts in the field, mostly professors, and from a dozen years experience in the field of counseling and guidance on the Texas-Mexico border. It is this writer's humble opinion that we have long neglected this population, have made our job a little harder, and have flatly "short changed" the child himself. It is further intended that this work be at a level that will be comprehended by the parent as well as adding insight for all who must meet and understand this parent.

WHO IS THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN?

The population of the border area presents a social situation in which people from two countries have settled to create a sub-culture different from the two national norms. There still exists, however, some strong ties with the mother country and the vernacular tongue prevails with the great majority of these people. It is indeed a distinctive border culture with a dual society based on ethnic differences.

To begin to understand this breed of people, we must go back and take a look at the foundation of this area. This will hold true to all the border area from El Paso to Brownsville; however, it could also apply to the entire Mexico-United States border area.

Originally inhabited by migratory Indians, the border was permanently settled from Mexico as an extension of new Spain around the middle of the 18th century. Families from northern Mexico who colonized the border were given free land grants by Spanish authorities. United States settlers entered the area at the beginning of the 19th century, but the Mexicans and Mexican way of life continued to dominate the area. After Texas won its independence, United States cultural influences increased although the population is still primarily of Mexican descent. The major settlement of Anglo-Americans in the Valley and border area of the state began in the early part of the 20th century. Purchasers of this undeveloped land came mainly from the United States Midwest. Real estate syndicates promoted the area as truck farming, citrus, and cattle country. There was a heavy influx of Mexicans who were political refugees from the Revolution of 1910.

Immigration has continued since then at a heavy pace.

At present the two main ethnic groups on the border are the Anglos, white residents who came primarily from the Midwest, and the Mexican-Americans, who are descendants of early settlers and recent immigrants from Mexico. For a while, there was a group of fluctuating size and significance composed of "braceros", the transient Mexican laborers imported by international agreement to pick crops and work for the railroads. The agreements have ceased or are down to almost nil. Another group that comes and goes is composed of Mexican Nationals ("wetbacks") that live on the Mexican border and cross to work illegally. Some use local passports to cross but are not eligible to work, although many do work. There are also the "green card" holders that can come to work legally for specific periods of time. The number of Negroes residing in this area never amounts to more than one percent.

The typical town is populated by both Anglos and Mexican-Americans, living mostly in separated residential districts divided by a highway or railroad tracks. Most of the towns and cities line the main highways. A few hamlets inhabited only by the Mexican-Americans can be found along the main highways near the border. Anglo isolation from the Mexican-American is not only spatial but with a very few exceptions also social. Virtually the only relationship between the two groups is economic. Except for a small phase, most of the Mexican-American population consists of wage workers in stores, canneries, light factories, and field workers. There is an increase in number of Mexican-Americans coming into the school systems. Even though there are many Mexican-American teachers, Mexican-American top administrators are very few and Mexican-

American superintendents are extremely rare.

A stereotyped image of the other is held by each ethnic group. This image is reflected daily in descriptive terms used by one group to designate members of the other group. Mexican-Americans refer to Anglos with the derisive terms, "gringos", "gabachos", and "bolillos". Non-derogatory terms for English speaking people are "Anglos" and "Americanos". Mexican-Americans reserve the terms of "chicanos", "mejicanos", and "raza" for themselves. At present, the young Mexican-Americans prefer the "new" term of chicano for themselves, while the older Mexican-American prefers mejicano or even Latin American or Spanish American. Anglos refer to the Spanish speaking population as "Latins" and "Mexicans", but also use the derogatory term of "Meskins". Some use the face-slapping word of "greasers".

More and more the Mexican-Americans have come to resent the economic dominance of the Anglo and his associated air of superiority. *Due to lack* of education and training, the majority of Mexican-Americans obtain underpaid work and even those who are fully qualified for good jobs receive lower salaries than Anglos -- if and when given an opportunity at these positions. They also resent the contempt for their customs. Some school authorities have punished Mexican-American children and threatened them with expulsion for speaking Spanish at school.(2) At this very moment, certain schools in the Valley are being challenged by students through boycotts. It appears that the sleeping giant is awakening and not in a very happy mood.

The Anglo regards the Mexican-American as lazy, morally-lax, ignorant, and superstitious.

Many Anglos have expressed the opinion that "We know what the Meskins need and what is good for them". Such misconceptions unfortunately exist today and are due to the Anglo's frequent failure to understand the Mexican-American's customs and values. This is compounded with the hope of remaining in control of a servile labor force. The Anglo white-collar worker also depreciates Mexican-Americans because he regards the educated members of their group as a threat to his job which may be taken away from him and given to a lower-paid, darker skinned employee.

The Anglo stereotype of the Mexican-American is also applied to the Mexican bracero, wetback, and green cards, who are also looked down upon by both Anglos and Mexican-Americans. The latter group also regards them as economic threats because they work for lower wages than United States citizens are willing to accept. Mexican farm workers are contemptously called "mariachis" in Mexican-American circles.

The social relationship between Anglos and Mexican-Americans is changing with the economic advancement of educated Mexican-Americans and their gradual but slow acceptance in Anglo circles. This trend is reflected in the increasing number of Mexican-Americans who live on the Anglo side of the tracks and in marriage between the two groups. However, this is hardly the case in middle and lower socio-economic levels.

Mexican-Americans consider themselves members of "La Raza", which carries the broader meaning of a group of people united by common values and customs. La Raza means enduring spirit, not race. Although different in connotation from the meaning in Mexico, the Mexican-Americans use the term to characterize themselves as a minority group within the context of United States culture and to distinguish themselves from the Anglo

members of their particular community.(3) The concept of "La Raza" in South Texas embodies much of the old value system derived from Mexican folk culture. Religion and group loyalty are focal values in this system. The ideal behavior pattern prescribed by the concept stresses good manners, performance of religious duties and observance of high moral standards.

Certain character traits valued by the group must be developed by the individual to be a respected member of "La Raza". Foremost of the traits essential to male prestige is "machismo" --full development of manliness. He must display this quality by his sexual prowess, dignity, aloofness, and ability to stand up for his own rights. He is the absolute master in his home. As for the woman, she cultivates the quiet quality of womanliness which makes a man feel viril. She waits on her husband and shows him absolute respect. She does not resent her role or envy the independence of the Anglo woman, sinch her fulfillment lies in helping her husband achieve his goals. Female gossip is tolerated--never with man. The head of the family receives respect not only from his family but also from any visitor who crosses his threshold. A visitor must never enter a home, be seated, or take any liberty until he is invited to do so. So precious is the dignity of the individual that he constantly guards it against any who would lower it. He particularly mistrusts strangers who might take advantage of him and the poorer he is the more suspicious he will be.

The children are taught to defend themselves in a hostile world in order that they will know to maintain their dignity as adults. Many of these lessons are taught verbally or non-verbally. This education takes place primarily in the home. Every child must learn a complex system of

etiquette which enables him to show respect for others while maintaining his own dignity. He is taught to refuse charity. Formal schooling constitutes a small part of the child's education. With the lower classes, only a few years of schooling are regarded as necessary for a child before he goes to work in the fields to help his family earn a livable income; however, this has changed drastically in the last 25 years. Many a youngster, before he has reached his tenth birthday, concludes that there is no advantage in intensive schooling. Discrimination and indifferences of many teachers -- overtly or inadvertently -- have been major causes for youngsters to develop this negative concept. Among upper classes and most of the middle classes, higher education is always the major goal.

THE FAMILY

Nowhere is the conflict between the Anglo and the Mexican-American more pronounced than in the values of the family. The Anglo democratic family with its concept of female equality violates Mexican-American ideals. No respectable Mexican-American male would ever don an apron to do the dishes. His philosophy is summed up in saying "En Mi Casa, Yo Mando" (In my house, I command). Within the family is found the strongest feeling of belonging. The Anglo practice of divorce and serial monogamy is regarded as immoral and disgusting. Outside the home, the Mexican-American husband enjoys extra-marital freedoms that give the Anglo husband a sense of guilt or sin. The Anglo concept of sexual fidelity in marriage is foreign to Mexican-American culture which brands infidelity as a vice only when it involves neglect or abandonment of a man's family. In many cases, a husband maintains a mistress. The nearer he lives to the border, the more often this happens. This is not restricted to any particular socio-economic level.

Parents are responsible for the physical welfare, morality, and education of their children. Children are taught good manners, social, and religious obligations, the value system of "La Raza", and the performance of everyday tasks. Above all, the child is taught to honor and defend the family. His family name is first, the given name is second.

Marriage is a contract between families as well as between individuals. No proper person would marry without the consent and approval of the elders in his family. He should not marry below his family's class and prestige level. The Mexican-American family does not fragment into biological

units as the Anglo does after marriage. The majority of the marriages are performed in church since the great majority of Mexican-Americans are catholic and the church will not recognize the marriage if it is not performed in the church. Divorce is scarce with these people.

Outside the family, the closest social relationships are the ritual kinship ties of the godparenthood system (compadrazo).(2).

THE CONCEPT OF HEALTH

It is always a matter of concern for the entire family when an individual of the family is ill. No major treatment is ever accepted for a sick person unless the head of the family approved of it. So when a health worker or a school worker is dealing with a member of the family, he is really dealing with the entire family which often includes distant relatives and compadres.

The Mexican-American diagnoses illness on the basis of its natural or supernatural causation. They feel most mental illnesses are of supernatural origin. Diseases of supernatural origin fall into three main categories: (1) those sent by God or a Saint as punishment on misdeeds; (2) those caused by witchcraft or the evil eye; and (3) fright sickness caused by seeing ghosts. Even though these theories are most prevalent among the lower classes, they permeate the entire class system. Even the most avowed skeptics of the entire stratification of classes will cite cases of witchcraft which they have witnessed.

A LOOK AT THE FACTS

With this abbreviated look at the background of this group of people, the records and all the related information of the child to be counseled are reviewed. Is he really a mentally retarded child or has he been labeled as one because of his low achievement in the regular classroom. Ruth Rice tells us that she believes that as high as seventy percent of children in Special Education classes for the mentally retarded are not mentally retarded but have learning disabilities.(4) In testing these children, are the best instruments used? Are the most appropriate personnel doing the testing? The author sincerely believes that these questions are always in the back of the mind of the parent -- but seldom asked. In case after case, the parent will nod her head agreeing with the test interpreter, however, one knows that she has not understood a word. As Dr. William Wolfe says, "Are we 'eye-balling' this person? When this youngster has been classified as a mental retardate, is the evaluation as accurate as possible with the data available? Do we know this little fellow?"

THE COUNSELING SESSION

The setting is ready for the counseling session with the parent. All the ammunition needed is at hand to come face to face with the parent. It is now the "hour of truth" (La hora de la verdad). And so, the session begins.

Part I

Mr. and Mrs. Jose Garcia have just walked into your office to talk to you about their son being transferred to Special Education class for the mentally retarded. Their son, Tomas, twelve years old, after being retained at the third grade for the second time, was referred for testing. After all required tests were administered, Tomas was diagnosed as a M. R. child with an I. Q. of 60. All documents were properly signed by the appropriate personnel, including the parents' consent to place Tomas in Special Education. They are here to talk to you, the counselor, about their son ending up in a class for the "crazy" children. As hypothetical as this case may sound, it is a very realistic and common situation we find in our Special Education Classes where there is a high percentage of Mexican-American children. The Garcias are here to find out about this class and how "sick" their son is -- since they have heard that these special classes are for the mentally sick. They are a confused couple and are here seeking your help and clarification. They can barely speak English. In broken English and mostly Spanish, they tell you that their Tomasito, child number six of their nine children, is not "crazy." That he can do a lot of things well at home. At his tender age, he works very well in the fields -- just like his older brothers. That Mrs. Gonzales (mid-wife) delivered him just like all their children and she didn't say

anything about Tomas being sick or crazy or M.R. If he is sick, how long will it be before he gets well? When they go to Michigan to work in the sugar beet fields, Tomasito goes to the stores on errands and brings the correct change. He follows instructions well at work and speaks in English with his foreman. That he is obedient, has made his first communion and recites his prayers in Spanish and English. That he eats well and loves to play and watch television. That he brings home all the "papers" that are sent from school to the parents and after they sign them, Tomasito returns them to school -- without ever losing a single one.

As you patiently listen to this parent, your mind is recording and analyzing all this information and wondering if this parent is even aware that Tomasito is a M. R. child. That maybe they have not accepted the cold fact that their son is a M. R. and last but not least, that maybe they do not know what a M. R. child is.

Then you start -- that everyday a handicapped child is born, and that we have over six million M. R.'s of every ethnic group in the United States. No, it is not a punishment from God or some Saint, nor that it is a reflection of weak or low machismo (manliness) on the part of the father. Causes for this child being M. R. are many, including German measles and how it affects child; very fast or very slow delivery; position of the baby; congential disorder -- situations and conditions that only fate controls. Things that nobody can control -- we just don't know enough, even though medical science has made great strides. In telling this parent the above, <u>you must remember that you are talking to Mexican-American parents</u>. Terminology must be kept very, very simple. Let us

not forget that the median of school years completed by Mexican-Americans 25 years of age and over in the state of Texas in 1950 was 3.6 and in 1960 it came up to 6.1.(5) Also, these parents are very sentimental, extremely sensitive and highly emotional. They have been hurt many times through discrimination, humilitation, stereotyping, and misunderstandings. You will probably have a hard time making them look at you "straight in the eye."

When the author works with parents of exceptional children, after receiving them wherever the session is to take place and making them as comfortable as possible, they are handed a coin that reads on one side -- "I accept you as human beings regardless of the circumstances -- that I am aware of your background, your customs, your heritage, your feelings." On the other side of the coin, it reads, "I am only a human being like you are and I am willing to work with you so that we can get to know each other better and both can get maximum benefits and be able to plan for your child. We are going to communicate and talk with each other." This feeling must be conveyed to the parents -- verbally and non-verbally. Not until one has achieved this task will parents begin to listen, hear, accept and relate to the counselor.

It is the opinion of this writer that without a good knowledge of background, culture, customs, and mores of these people, you will not be able to fully understand and counsel them.

Part II

The second phase of the counseling session will take you into what roles will be played by the school and by the parents.

The program must be discussed in depth and must be understood from the very beginning to its projected end. All the procedures and objectives must be clear to the parents. Questions must be answered completely. Don't forget that these people are suspicious and the lower their standing in socio-economic level the more suspicious they are. Constant positive re-enforcement of this factor of understanding and trust is a must at this stage. The child's welfare must be kept afront of all feelings, decisions, and consequences. Acceptance can be an awfully hard and bitter pill to swallow for these parents, being that they are highly emotional and might feel that their child is "handicapped" enough or has had enough sadness and hurt. In discussing the program, you will inevitably run into the biggest barrier you will encounter -- conflict of values. You will find that the WASP values are very different and at times directly opposite to their values. The child is a product of his home, his barrio (neighborhood), his environment. The school's program must meet the child's needs. How much acculturation are the parents willing to compromise? If the child is the oldest son of the family, the psychological impact will cut much deeper than if the child is the youngest son. The oldest son automatically is heir to taking over the family structure in the absence of the father. Will they delegate this responsibility to the next oldest son? Suppose he is the only son? Will the parents get involved in the process? Will they stand the pressure of the neighbors? You must support them and re-enforce the concept that what you are planning for their son is the paramount issue and not what the neighbors feel, say, or do. To be a good

parent is not a small order--to be a good parent of a mentally retarded child is a much taller order. Can you relay to them that exceptional children give parents joy and happiness as much as so called "normal children?" That even "handicapped" children can be trained to be useful and productive citizens? The task is gigantic, but so are the rewards. The eternal gratitude and smile of their eyes is worth all efforts in working with these long forgotten and neglected people.

In closing, one last recommendation to the counselor -- that he take pride and joy in his work. No one has said it better than Kahlil Gibran in The Prophet:

> Work is love made visible.
> And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste,
> It is better that you should leave your work
> And sit at the gate of the temple and take
> Alms of those who work with joy.
> For if you bake bread with indifference, you
> Bake a bitter bread that feeds but half a man's hunger. (6)

The M. R. child deserves more than bitter bread from all of us.

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June, 1959 - September, 1964

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PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Texas State Teachers Association
Texas Personnel and Guidance Association

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS (Continued)

American Personnel and Guidance Association
American Group Psychotherapy Association, Inc.
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